DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 112 EA 012 019

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TITLE The National Safe School Study: Overview and Implications.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 4-8, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; *Crime; *Delinquency; Delinquency Prevention; *Discipline Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; Humanization; Interpersonal Relationship; Leadership; Principals; School Administration; School Security; School Size; *School Vandalism; Student Teacher Relationship; Surveys; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS National Institute of Education

ABSTRACT

From 1975 to 1978 the National Institute of Education conducted a national survey on school crime. They assessed the incidence and seriousness of the problem, the number and location of schools affected, the costs, the means of prevention used, and the effectiveness of these means. More than 4,000 elementary and secondary schools were surveyed and a representative sample of 642 junior and senior high schools was visited by onsite field representatives. Researchers found that although school violence appears to be waning, it is still a serious problem. Several factors are associated with school violence, including high crime rate and presence of gangs in the area, high proportion of male students, large schools and classes, and a lack of principal firmness, fairness and predictability in enforcement. Factors associated with vandalism included high crime rate, large schools, lack of good enforcement by the principal, lack of family integration and discipline, poor coordination between faculty and administration, and high importance of grades. The study suggests that crime can be reduced by an equitable structure of order, legitimate and effective governance, strong leadership, "personalization" of the schools, and better security measures. (Author/JM)

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The National Safe School Study: Overview and Implications

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Presented at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco

EA 012 019

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The National Safe School Study:

Overview and Implications

In 1974, the 93rd Congress mandated the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare to conduct a national study of the incidence and seriousness of school crime; the number and location of schools affected; the costs; the means of prevention in use, and the effectiveness of these means.

Approximately one year ago, the Secretary reported back to Congress the results of a three-phase study conducted by the National Institute of Education with technical assistance by Research Triangle Institute, North Carolina.

Phase I - involved a mail survey of principals in a representative sample of more than 4000 elementary and secondary schools. Principals in the sample were asked to report in detail on the incidence of illegal or disruptive activities for selected 1-month periods between February 1976 and January 1977.

Phase II - In Phase II, a nationally representative sample of 642 public junior and senior high schools was surveyed using on-site field representatives. This survey entailed interviews with principals, teachers, and pupils.

Phase III - In Phase III, 10 schools were selected for intensive, qualitative analysis using a case study approach. Most of the 10 schools selected had had serious problems with crime and violence in the past and had changed rather dramatically for the better in a short period of time. Researchers were especially interested in successful coping or failure to cope on the part of these schools.

Questions of the Safe Schools Study

These are the major questions addressed by the study:

1. How serious is the problem of crime and disruption in our nation's schools?

2. How many schools, students, and teachers are affected, in what ways, and to what extent?

3. When and where are the risks of school crime and violence highest?

4. Who are the victims and who are the offenders?

5. What are the attitudes and experiences of the victims?

6. What factors are associated with violence and vandalism in schools?

7. What measures are schools using to reduce or prevent crime?

8. What measures do principals, teachers, and students recommend?

9. What are the implications of this research for school policy and for intervention with adolescents?

How Serious is the Problem?

In a word, the problem is as serious as it has ever been, but no more so. It appears to have peaked in late 1960s and early 1970s and, if anything, is on the decline. (Baby boom - crest of wave; national climate of protest, disruption, and violence - Vietnam) Regardless of its seriousness, now compared to earlier, one finding is clear: The risks of violence for young adolescents in cities are greater at school than anywhere else. It was found that nearly 7000 schools in this country are seriously affected by crime.

Factors Associated with Violence and Vandalism in Schools

Violence

1. The crime rate and the presence or absence of fighting gangs in the school's attendance area.

2. The proportion of students who are male.

3. The grade level in secondary school and the age of the students. With

minor exceptions, the risks of being a victim of either attack or robbery in secondary school decline steadily as grade level increases. It is 7th graders who are most likely to be attacked or robbed and 12th graders who are least so.

4. The size of the school. The larger the school, the greater the risk of violence. Two of my colleagues on this panel, Ed Wynne and Bob Grinder, will be discussing a concept called "disengagement." The finding of the Safe Schools Study that relates increased violence with school size seems to accompany pupils' feelings of alienation and may lead to disengagement, both psychological and physical. Our friends in sociology and anthropology who have studied adolescent behavior might suggest that increased school size reduces the opportunity for bonding to take place.

5. The principal's firmness, fairness, and predictability in enforcing rules.

6. The size of classes and the number of different students taught by a teacher in a week. (Again, more continuous contact and smaller groups apparently enhance engagement and bonding.)

7. The relevance of academic courses and the importance of grades to students.

8. The students' feelings (perceptions) of control over their lives. Schools in which students feel they have little control over what happens to them experience more violence.

Vandalism (Factors associated with,)

1. Crime rate
2. School size
3. The principal (firm, fair, consistent)
4. Family integration, intactness, and discipline

5. Coordination between faculty and administration

6. Teacher attitudes toward pupils, toward school, and toward teaching. (Hostile and authoritarian attitudes on the part of teachers toward students were related to the incidence of school vandalism.)

7. Importance of grades - (Schools where students strive to get good grades have more vandalism!)

8. Importance of leadership status (Schools where there is intense competition for leadership have greater property losses.)

The Role of School Governance

Within all schools, there is a process of governance that serves as a means of organizing behavior and achieving the ends of a school. Governance provides a rational structure of order, generally expressed explicitly through rules and regulations and implicitly through the schools system of incentives and sanctions, all of this, in the context of faculty attitude, involvement and competence.

A central conclusion of the National Safe Schools Study is that strong, clear, consistent school governance, particularly by the principal, can help in reducing school crime and misbehavior.

Implications

The Safe School Study was designed to aid Congress in its deliberations on crime and violence in schools, not to formulate a Federal program as such. Even so, the study is rich with implications for action. I will discuss some of the more salient implications for action as they relate to three major themes of the Safe School Study.

Theme One: The study showed that while past increases in crime and violence have leveled off, there is abundant evidence of a problem requiring concerted, reasoned action.

1. Crime and disruption in schools should be recognized as a significant problem, and the problem should receive the open attention and public concern it deserves.

In the course of the study, investigators found a recurring tendency to minimize the extent of the problem - a kind of "This is to be expected"; and "We've learned to live with it and survive" attitude.

2. If a school district has reason to think that its schools have a serious problem the dimensions of which are unclear, an assessment of the problem is in order. Some of the methods and instruments developed in the Safe School Study are suitable for such an assessment.

3. School districts and their communities should recognize that schools can do a great deal to reduce crime and disruption. If the feeling that nothing can be done pervades a school, then nothing is expected or demanded of students, faculty, or administrators.

Theme Two: A system of governance providing an equitable structure of order characterizes schools that are working and seems to differentiate safe schools from problem schools. Student commitment to the school is an importnat factor in the safety of schools.

1. Seriously affected schools should give particular attention to the establishment of legitimate and effective governance programs. Such programs involve at least two things: (a) firm, fair, and consistent discipline; (b) a structure of incentives (such as grades and honors) that adequately rewards students for their efforts and achievements. Attention should be

given to rewarding diverse kinds of accomplishments (including individual improvement) and to broadening the availability of rewards.

2. Schools and their communities should recognize that the role of the principal is important to the success of any school, but that it is the key in schools that are affected by crime and disruption. Seriously affected schools require principals who have strong leadership and administrative abilities. Recruitment and selection of such principals in essential. Attention should be given to the career ladder for assistant principals and to their movement into principalships. Apprenticeships with principals who have demonstrated success in leadership of difficult schools should be considered. Given the unusual qualities required for this job, incentives should be available to keep talented principals in the schools that need them most.

3. Consideration should be given to ways of increasing the "personalization" of secondary schools. As indicated earlier, school size, student anonymity, and alienation seem to be factors in school crime. The principal's accessibility and lower student-teacher ratios should help to "personalize" larger schools. Increasing the amount of continuous class time that a student spends with a given group of students would: (a) increase personal contact (teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil); (b) in junior highs, ease the transition from elementary schools; and (c) reduce traffic in the halls.

Theme Three: Security measures and procedures can be helpful in reducing violence and property loss in schools, provided they are not used as a substitute for effective governance. In the absence of adequate leadership and student engagement with the school and with schooling, security measures often represent a visible challenge to youngsters bent on attacking the school or other students.

1. School systems with serious problems of violence and vandalism can benefit from the hiring of additional security personnel. However, the recruitment and training of such personnel should emphasize interpersonal skills as well as security functions.

2. Schools experiencing serious problems should give special attention to surveillance and traffic control in areas such as hallways, stairwells, and cafeterias, where violence and disruption are most likely to start. The better a principal is able to control these strategic locations, the better the chances of restoring order to the school. This may include the use of adult hall monitors.

3. Schools and school systems should move to improve recordkeeping and reporting of serious problems to the police and other appropriate agencies.